



BY MICHAEL SLATTER

THE parallels between rock music and horror imagery are many and varied, and getting ever closer with videos now standard practice for a song - witness Michael Jackson's "Thriller", ZZ Top's "TV Dinner" or anything by Ozzy Osbourne. The man who has seen it, done it and been it all is Alice Cooper. His marriage of music and theatrics was, and remains, unequalled.

From the earliest beginnings, rock has gone hand in hand with horror imagery. The first major force to connect the two was Screamin' Jay Hawkins, a Blues singer/musician. All through the late 50's Screamin' Jay was ushered into concerts in a flaming coffin, followed by much strutting around amongst his collection of skulls and shrunken heads. He is still active today, playing in clubs around America.

Next came the dubious delights of the Rolling Stones. They garnered an evil reputation with song titles like "Sympathy for the Devil", "Paint it Black" and "Let it Bleed," but preferred a sex and drugs lifestyle. The Devil featured prominently with subsequent artists. Black Sabbath opened early concerts with a fake occult ceremony, Black Widow made LP's featuring real occult ceremonies. Blue Oyster Cult (an Alice support group) among others, followed in their wake. After the Alice Cooper Band split in 1974, the group Kiss deemed themselves worthy to step into their shoes. Their stage shows were indeed extravagant and fast-paced, but for British audiences, the music was just so much second-rate pap.

When punk eventually calmed down from its initial anarchy/destruction image and the bands fell into their respective slots, the influences began to emerge. The Stranglers' "Down in the Sewer", The Damned's wonderful "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "Video Nasty" etc and The Dickies' LP "Dawn of the Dickies" with its Romero-type blue zombies adorning the cover, to name but a few.

These days, the tradition is carried on by the mindless heavy metal groups and their preoccupation with death - Helloween, Grave-digger, Slayer, Bathory, Ozzy and the occasional left-over punk offerings like The Cramps or Wendy O. Williams (Maggots: The record). Theatrical horror is not dead either. Check out the wonderfully sleazy W.A.S.P. or the more professional Iron Maiden.

And then there was Alice. The son of a minister, he was born Vincent Damon Furnier on February 4 1948. After incarnations as The Earwigs and The Spiders, the Alice Cooper Band first gained recognition in the late 60's for being able to empty a concert hall in minutes. Their attitude was one of complete opposition to the "Peace, love and apathy" of the hippies - more of noise hate and chaos. Frank Zappa ("Weasels Ripped My Flesh" and others) found them, signed them, recorded two unsuccessful, unprofessional albums and dropped them in a blaze of bad publicity.

Alice had already acquired a reputation for shock by dressing and making up as a woman, and later bringing live chickens on stage. He was rumoured to be biting their heads off and spitting blood at the audience. Although this was untrue, it was never denied - more publicity for the Alice Cooper machine.

So, as 1971 ticked around, Alice gained a new manager (Shep Gordon), a new producer (Bob Ezrin) and a new album "Love it to Death." A breakthrough for Alice and his band, the new producer created a tight sound, allowing Alice the full range of his vocal capabilities. They gained a massive chart success from the album, "I'm Eighteen" (for which Malcolm McLaren was said to have signed Sex Pistol Johnny Rotten whilst watching him mime to it). Also among the songs was a 6½ minute opus, "The Ballad of Dwight Frye" dedicated to the diminutive Hollywood genre actor (Renfield in "Dracula" etc) who spent his last years in an insane asylum.

Money and notoriety fuelled Alice's creative juices to bring out a succession of weird and wonderful albums, including "Billion Dollar Babies" and "Killer." By this time the stage show was becoming even more bizarre. Alice sang to a large boa constrictor (a permanent fixture throughout his career) he chopped up baby dolls and the band tied him up in a straight jacket. Then there were the mock executions - the hanging or the electric chair and later, an early version of the guillotine, all played for maximum shock effects.

The taboo-breaking lyrics, too, mimicked the macabre stage show. We were given songs about death ("Killer"), masturbation ("Muscle of Love"), parental negligence ("Dead Babies"), necrophilia ("I Love the Dead"), the occult ("Black Jujy"), religion ("Hallowed be my Name"), dentist horror ("Unfinished Sweet"), transvestism ("Mary-Ann"), sick things ("Sick Things"), even James Bond ("Man With the Golden Gun").

In 1974 Alice mutually disbanded the group, the remaining musicians forming Billion Dollar Babies and releasing two albums before fading into obscurity. Meanwhile, Alice's first foray into solo recordings was going well with "Welcome to my Nightmare" containing all his old quirkiness while leaving the heavier sound by the wayside. The album was a showcase for an Alice Cooper nightmare (no kidding!), with the stage show becoming an Alladin's cave of devils, demons, a giant cyclops and before-their-time video effects. To top it all, Vincent Price was brought in to add his dulcet tones to the record, with a monologue extolling the virtues of the Black Widow spider and her fatal bite.

The next album, "Alice Cooper goes to Hell" was just that, with Alice being condemned for his crimes to that hot place. He meets with the devil and negotiates his release, once again leaving the impression that it was all another nightmare. In the following years he mellowed out a little, settled down and released some average, but still listenable albums, including "From the Inside," the story of his incarceration into a drying out clinic (a mental asylum on the LP) for his alcohol addiction.



THE MAN BEHIND THE MAKEUP MEETS THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK.

He was still writing horror influenced material like "Tag, You're It," a humorous story of a woman being stalked by a psycho, and "Fresh Blood" about a neighbourly vampire. He was also still singing about the unmentionable - as in "Pass the Gun Around" (Russian roulette) and "leather Boots" (police brutality).

No stranger to cinema, he appeared in DIARY OF A MAD HOUSEWIFE, SEXTETTE, SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND and ROADIE, made a TV special, "Welcome to my Nightmare" (with Vincent price) and guested on many TV shows, including being a regular on "Hollywood Squares" for which he lost a lot of fans. He also sang "I am the Future" for the excellent teenage schoolwar film CLASS OF 1984. His latest album features "He's Back (the Man Behind the Mask)", the title song from FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 6 - JASON LIVES with Jason himself appearing in the video for the song. Then, in 1984, Alice was offered the starring role in a Spanish horror film, THE BITE. It was promptly shelved until last year when, to coincide with his world tour, it was released on video as MONSTER DOG.

The story concerns a rock star (Alice, who else?) and his friends when they drive out to a mysterious mansion he has just inherited. Various plot intricacies (?) include a family history of lycanthropy, a pack of vicious wild dogs and a posse out for Alice's blood, believing him to be a werewolf. The viewer is left with an "Is he - isn't he" situation (he is). The film itself is pretty dire, very badly dubbed with some dodgy special effects but Alice manages to rise above it all and puts in a superb performance.

And so, towards the end of 1986, Alice came full circle with his "Constrictor" album and "Nightmare Returns" tour. Here was a mighty sound created with the aid of guitarist/muscleman Kane Roberts (ex-heavy metal group Ratt) and, of course, Alice's inventive lyrics. The stage show borrowed heavily from previous tours with a couple of new tricks thrown in for good measure.

Once again Alice is condemned to hell/the mental asylum for his copious crimes - baby (doll) killing, wife beating and necrophilia - Alice keeps a corpse in his refrigerator. He is put in a straight jacket but escapes and strangles a nurse. From here the new material is showcased with the exceptional "Teenage Frankenstein." Alice rushes round the stage, collecting bits and pieces to construct a giant monster. Suddenly it springs to life and shuffles round to the pounding music, heading for its creator. After flooring Alice, the monster returns to its station and it only remains for Alice to deconstruct his creation.

With all this added to his list of crimes he is caught and sentenced to death, paving the way for the ultimate horror. A huge

guillotine is brought on stage by his demons while the repenting Alice is placed on the block. "We have total realism now, even the head twitches when the blade comes down" said Alice in an interview. Apparently the blade was made of solid steel and checked every night just in case the real Alice's head was cropped. After the executioner has paraded the bloody head in front of the audience, everything darkens. Suddenly, Alice appears in top hat and tails for a rousing encore of his biggest hits, "School's Out," "Elected" and "Under my Wheels," regressing once again to the nightmare theme. The audience is left feeling that they have been watching a true legend and seen their very own live video nasty.

Alice Cooper has always been happy with his horror image and he can still chill an audience with his sinister presence. Long may he continue to do so.

#### ALBUMS

- 1969 PRETTIES FOR YOU
- 1970 EASY ACTION
- 1971 LOVE IT TO DEATH  
KILLER
- 1972 SCHOOL' OUT
- 1973 BILLION DOLLAR BABIES  
SCHOOL DAYS (reissue of first two albums as a double album)
- 1974 MUSCLE OF LOVE  
ALICE COOPER'S GREATEST HITS
- 1975 WELCOME TO MY NIGHTMARE
- 1976 ALICE COOPER GOES TO HELL
- 1977 LACE AND WHISKY  
THE ALICE COOPER SHOW (live)
- 1978 FROM THE INSIDE
- 1980 FLUSH THE FASHION
- 1982 ZIPPER CATCHES SKIN
- 1983 DA-DA
- 1986 CONSTRICTOR

